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Welcome to the Desert of Transition! Post-socialism, the European Union and a New Left in the Balkans

Srećko Horvat and Igor Štiks¹

In the shadow of the current political transformations of the Middle East, a wave of protest from Tel Aviv, Madrid to Wall Street, and the ongoing Greek crisis, the post-socialist Balkans has been boiling. Protests, displaying for the most part social demands, have been seen in Romania, Albania, Serbia, Macedonia, and most notably, in Croatia throughout 2011. At the start of the protests in Croatia, the country's Minister of the Interior Tomislav Karamarko described the protesters as "Indijanci", meaning native American "Indians". His qualification was meant to belittle the protests and their demands by describing them as a colourful carnival of politically irrelevant actors. Not only did this turn against the Minister himself – the protestors appropriated the offense and turned it into a satirical weapon against the government, so that many later started to talk about the "Indian revolution"—but it also revealed the essence of the Eastern European, and especially Balkan predicament today.

In spite of the democratic promise of 1989 and the final arrival of "the End of History", post-socialist citizens, those "Indians" of the "Wild East", today feel largely excluded from decision-making processes: most elections have turned out to be little more than a re-shuffling of the same political oligarchy with no serious differences in political programmes or rhetoric. Many lost their jobs (during the "privatisation" campaigns) or had their labour conditions worsen and their pensions evaporate; most of the guaranteed social benefits (such as free education and health care) progressively disappeared. In addition to that, citizens are highly indebted, owing money to foreign-owned banks that spread around the Balkans and that control its whole financial sector². After the series of devastating wars across the former Yugoslavia that claimed up to 130,000 deaths in the 1990s, the last decade brought about another wave of impoverishment, this time managed by "euro-compatible" elites ready to implement further neo-liberal reforms portrayed as a necessary part of the EU accession process.

Calling the process of turning the former socialist states into liberal democracies and free-market economies (apparently the inseparable twins of the new era) "transition" has brought into public and political discourse quasi-biblical connotations of acceding to the "land of plenty". But even today, twenty years later, we hear that the Transition is

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² For example, 75.3% in Serbia, 90% in Croatia and up to 95% in Bosnia and Herzegovina. See Yoji Koyama (forthcoming), 'Impact of the Global Financial Crisis on the Western Balkan Countries: Focusing on Croatia', in Rosefielde, S., Mizobata, S., and Kuboniwa, M. (eds.), *Global Shock Wave*, 2011.

incomplete. The wandering in the desert seems to be endless. In spite of the rhetoric of incompleteness, we can observe that the free-market reigns supreme; post-socialist Eastern Europe is fully incorporated into the capitalist world with a semi-peripheral role. In practice this means the availability of cheap and highly educated labour in proximity of the capitalist core and a quasi-total economic dependence on the core and its multinational banks and corporations, and, finally, the accumulation of debt. On the political side, liberal democratic procedures formally seem to be there. In spite of that, the notion of an incomplete transition still dominates the media comments and the academic discourse and political elites are using it to justify yet another wave of privatisation of state or previously socially owned assets. As if no one dares to say that 'transition' meant precisely bringing these states under the sway of capitalism. In this respect, the Transition as such is long over. There is nothing to "transit" to anymore. In our view, two main reasons seem to be behind the rhetoric of incomplete transition: avoidance of a full confrontation with the consequences of Transition, and, preservation of the discourse and relations of dominance *vis-à-vis* the former socialist states. One of the underlying assumptions of the eternal transition is therefore the "need" for tutelage and supervision.

Observers often point out to another transitional phenomenon, namely the appearances of "communist nostalgia". The politically-aseptic "Goodbye, Lenin" nostalgia is often seen with general sympathy, whereas an opinion poll showing that almost 61% of Romanians think that the life was better under Ceaucescu is met with strong disapproval and even disappointment³. Fervent liberals might point out that it is the "Egyptian pots of meat" story: "slaves" are always nostalgic about their tyrants instead of being happy to be "free" and despite the fact they are within close reach of the "promised land". Reading "nostalgia" as the expressed "wish" to return by magic to the state socialist regime— as if anyone offered that alternative —means avoiding the questions that simmer behind these feelings. Why do people feel politically disempowered and economically robbed and enslaved today? Why and when did liberal democracy and capitalist free-market economy turn wrong—was there any other possibility?—and why is it not getting any better? Since the "communist nostalgia" does not produce any political movement or programme, the answer has to be found in a widespread feeling that something does not work in the new system and that it should be changed following the ideals that were behind generous social policies of ex-communist states. Slovenian sociologist Mitja Velikonja in his study on "Tito-stalgia"⁴ shows two strains of the communist nostalgia: the passive, oriented towards cherishing the symbolic heritage of the old system, and the active nostalgia, the one that is trying to critically observe the current reality through the lenses of undisputable communist achievements in economic and social emancipation of the masses in the 20th century. Those who cannot or

³ See Rossen Vasilev, 'The Tragic Failure of Post-Communism in Eastern Europe', published at <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=23616>, 8 March 2011.

⁴ Mitja Velikonja, *Titostalgia – A Study of Nostalgia for Josip Broz*, Mediawatch, Peace Institute, Ljubljana, 2008, available online at <http://mediawatch.mirovni-institut.si/eng/Titostalgia.pdf>

refuse to acknowledge these feelings are turning a blind eye to growing discontent and social demands that are putting in question Transition both as a process of reform and as the teleological-ideological construct of dominance.

The EU's Balkanpolitik

The European Union is the main protagonist of the Eastern European Transition; according to its 1993 Copenhagen policy, it is supposed to educate, discipline and punish while offering EU membership as the prize at the end of the bumpy road of Transition where awaits, so the story goes, the democratic and economic pay off. However, the reality destroyed the fable: even when the goal was finally achieved, the promise was not fully kept- all but three member states from “old” Europe immediately imposed labour restrictions on free circulation for citizens of “new” Europe, breaking the promise of equal European citizenship. Moreover, there is even a need for further “monitoring” of the “Eastern Balkan” countries whose citizens (legally European citizens as well) are often treated as third-class citizens, as demonstrated in the case of those Romanians (most of them Roma) expelled recently from France as illegal aliens. Economic wellbeing has not been achieved nor has democracy flourished.

The EU has been the most powerful political and economic agent in a post-socialist Balkans whose political landscape is as varied as no other place in Europe. Nowhere as on this peninsula is the EU's *mission civilisatrice* so evident. Though it has fully integrated Slovenia, it “monitors” Romania and Bulgaria that have been heavily criticised and sanctioned (especially Bulgaria that lost millions in EU funds) for not being able to “catch up”. Five years after integration, these countries have been hit hard by the economic crisis.⁵ The EU not only supervises the Western Balkan candidates (“negotiations” being a euphemism for a one-way communication amounting to little less than the “translate-paste” operations during the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*), but it actually maintains two protectorates (Bosnia and Kosovo). The EU developed varied approaches: disciplining and punishing the members (Romania and Bulgaria), bi-laterally negotiating membership (Croatia and Montenegro), punishing and rewarding (Serbia and Albania), managing (Bosnia), governing (Kosovo), and, finally, ignoring (Macedonia blocked in the name dispute with Greece). The common denominator of all these approaches today is Crisis.

Social gloom reigns over the Balkans, but especially over the so-called “Western Balkans”, another geo-political construct forged in Brussels, composing the former Yugoslav republics, “minus Slovenia, plus Albania”. This part, on the other hand, has further complex attributes: it was not only the post-socialist, but also the post-partition and the post-conflict region. It has been entirely surrounded by the EU members in a sort of “ghetto” around which the Schengen ring has been slowly deployed, with Slovenia, Hungary and Greece patrolling the Fortress, the role for which Romania and Bulgaria have been, so far unsuccessfully, exercising as well. One could see the Schengen's enlargement— instead of the EU enlargement —as a continuation of the containment policies from the 1990s when the main aim was to prevent the war in the former

⁵ Vassilev, op. cit.

Yugoslavia spilling over its former international borders. In this respect, and save for the “minus Slovenia, plus Albania” approach that hides the fact that Slovenia is still deeply involved with its southern brethren and that Albania is primarily close to its Albanian kin in Kosovo, “Yugoslavia” has not disappeared as a geo-political space. A sense of the region’s unity, despite the conflicts, led Tim Judah to invent a new term for this space, “Yugo-sphere”⁶. The term caught on quickly. It does not, however, tell us much about the fact that the “spheres” are formed not only by their internal centripetal forces but also, even more importantly, by their external borders, or the isolation from other spheres.

Unlike in other regions, the EU took direct action in the Balkans. Kosovo is effectively run by the EU, via its Law and Order Mission (EULEX), although five EU member states still refuse to recognise the new state but participate in the mission. This reveals the failure of the US-led and mostly EU-backed Kosovo independence strategy that left the country and its population in limbo of the partial recognition that prevents it from joining any international organisation. Besides Bosnia and Kosovo, the European forces, led by Italy, intervened in Albania in 1997, the EU militaries were also present in Macedonia, and many EU members were involved in the NATO bombings of then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The EU in the Balkans is therefore not only a club that tests its candidates. It is an active player in transforming the region, politically, socially, and economically. Our survey of its *Balkanpolitik* begs an answer to the question of why it did not succeed in its stabilisation and integration policies?

The Empire’s Balkan Crisis

The US in general and the EU in the Balkans in particular dissimulate their dominance through “state-building” or “capacity-building” policies and local “ownership”. This is precisely what David Chandler calls “Empire in denial”⁷ and offers a convincing argument about neo-colonialism disguised as state-building, the examples of which being Bosnia and Kosovo for some time, but also Iraq and Afghanistan today, and possibly Libya or some other Middle-Eastern country tomorrow. The local ownership strategy in practice means little more than implementing externally dictated reforms but nesting responsibility within the local elites. An “Empire in denial” does not govern directly, due to the cost and unpopularity of this mode of domination, but via friendly regimes that remain responsible for implementing or not implementing the state-building or “EU-member”-building strategies.

However, problems arise when elected local elites avoid cooperating in domains that would cut the branch on which their power sits by reinforcing institutional independence, particularly of the judiciary and the police. The problem is further exacerbated by the ‘Empire in denial’s’ ideological inability to question these elected leaders, although the elections are themselves prone to various pre and post-electoral

⁶ Tim Judah, ‘Yugoslavia is dead, long live the Yugosphere’, LSEE papers on South-East Europe, November 2009.

⁷ David Chandler, *Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-building*, Pluto press, London – Ann Arbor, 2006.

manipulations by local oligarchies. It insists furthermore on continuous austerity measures and neo-liberal reforms that are supposed to be undertaken by that very same "democratically-elected", hugely corrupt and deeply undemocratic elites, that are eventually the only ones to benefit from these reforms.

Turkes and Gokgoz point out that the European commission's major strategy is precisely "neo-liberal restructuring", which in practice undermines democratic development, as the stated goal of the EU's actions, and allows for authoritarian practices⁸. The assumed causal relation between neoliberal economic reforms and the promotion of democracy appears, therefore, to be highly problematic. These two crucial elements of EU strategy towards the Western Balkans, as Turkes and Gokgoz emphasise, "have not fed one another." Rather, they argue, "the opposite has occurred." It seems that in a post-conflict situation characterized by close ties between businesses, criminal networks, state security apparatus and political elites, current EU strategy undermines its own stated goal, namely the stabilisation and democratisation of the region.

The trouble is precisely that neo-liberal reforms are opening up more opportunities for corruption and the predatory behaviour of the local elites, as the Croatian case amply shows. The privatisation process that includes infrastructure such as telecommunications, big industries, natural resources such as water, media outlets or even public services, in addition to the foreign bank investments or devastating credit lines, are just some of the "opportunities" rising out of neo-liberal restructuring, as the first phase of the incorporation into the EU-sphere. The case of the former Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, praised by the EU and currently in prison for widespread corruption charges, is a telling example of how the local elites can profit from the "restructuring" process.

The Winter of Croatian Discontent

"Zagreb = Maghreb". At first it seemed only as a *jeu de mots* employed by left-leaning media. But soon after the fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian dictators the "Facebook protests" started in Croatia as well.⁹ There is no simple analogy with the "Arab spring" and it would be indeed erroneous to try to establish one. Though there is a different situation in the Balkans, it exhibits certain commonalities with the wider Middle East and especially with the Greek situation, and is fertile ground for an analysis aiming to capture the current mood of discontent and rebellion at the very borders of the West.

Croatia went through a series of transformations since 1990 that involved a brutal war, nationalist autocracy of the 1990s, and a "euro-compatible" behaviour of post-

⁸ Mustafa Türkes and Göksu Gökgöz. 'The European Union's strategy towards the Western Balkans: Exclusion or Integration', *East European Politics and Societies* 20/4, 2006, pp. 659-690.

⁹ Toni Prug, 'Croatia protests show failure of political promise', *The Guardian*, 2 April 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/apr/02/croatia-protests-economic-slump>

Tudjman elites, reluctant to fully clear the mess of the previous decade. This finally brought Croatia to the threshold of the EU. But in what state does Croatia knock on the EU's door? From the \$3 billion foreign debt it inherited from Yugoslavia, it now has €45 billion, which amounts to 97.8% of the GDP that anyhow decreased in 2009 by 5.6% and an additional 1.5% in 2010.¹⁰ From one of the most prosperous and most developed Yugoslav republics, it is left with almost no industry. A dodgy privatisation in the 1990s, facilitated by the war, and the continuous neo-liberal reforms of the 2000s, created enormous social gaps and finally 19% unemployment rate today. As recently as April 2010 the Croatian government put forward the "Programme for Economic Recovery" basically adopting the austerity measures decreasing the number of public sector workers by 5% and the budget for paying them by 10%. It also announced the privatization of big state-owned firms such as the electric company, the woods and the water companies and the railways, all of this on top of already privatised successful state corporations such as Croatian Telecom, the famous pharmaceutical producer *Pliva* and the petrol company *Ina*. The tourist paradise of its famous coast hides the destruction of one of Europe's most advanced shipbuilding industries, the fourth strongest, owning some 1.5 percent of the global market. It employs 12,000 workers with around 35,000 jobs directly linked to it.¹¹ Croatia has been forced by the EU to stop state subsidies to shipyards which would necessarily entail a huge reduction, if not complete closure, of one of the most successful parts of the local industry.

All contradictions from the capitalist core such as financial shocks, reckless consumerism, big media domination, elite-driven politics, democratic deficit or commercialisation of public services are visible together with all political, social and economic problems of the post-socialist, post-partition and post-conflict semi-periphery. Croatia is absolutely dependant on the core in financial (as mentioned above the foreign banks own 90% of the sector), economic (foreign capital dominates all economic activities) and military matters (Croatia joined NATO in 2008). Neoliberal hegemony is coupled with conservative nationalism that practically turned into little less than an unholy alliance of state structures, big businesses and mafia. Until recently it all went unquestioned and then in winter, as if the Levantine echoes had found truly receptive ears on the other side of the Mediterranean, the protesters filled the streets.

The Spring of a New Left?

It all started primarily as a "Facebook"-movement gathering a younger politically confused generation unsatisfied with the new government policies. Then, on 26 February 2011, which could be seen as the starting point, a protest of war veterans and right-wing groups opposing the extradition and trial of a former Croatian soldier in Serbia was organised at the central square in Zagreb. It ended up in a violent conflict between a

¹⁰ For an analysis of the Croatian economic situation see Hermine Vidovic, 'Croatia: Difficult to come out of the crisis', in Peter Havlik et al. *Recovery – in low gear across though terrain*, "Current Analyses and Forecasts 7, Wiener Institut für Internationale Wirtschaftsvergleiche", February, 2011, p 77.

¹¹ See Koyama, op. cit.

crowd of mostly football hooligans and the police. However, only two days later we saw a different protest emerging. The “Facebook protests” started displaying more clearly the reasons for discontent, namely the disastrous social situation and a lack of confidence in institutions and a political system breeding corruption and deepening social inequalities. Independent protests uniting groups of various political stripes were a big surprise in itself. It was even more surprising to see banners denouncing the EU and capitalism as such, questioning the party system and, taking everything a step further, demanding a direct democracy.

The unexpected emergence of what we could call a new, organised and indeed original Left in Croatia that is actively involved in and is even shaping the current protest movement must be traced back to 2009. Back then an independent student movement articulated a strong resistance to the privatisation and commercialisation of higher education. In a sort of Hegelian “concrete universality”, their protest against neoliberal reforms in the field of education turned into probably the first strong political opposition to not only the government, but indeed the general political and social regime. During 35 days in spring and two weeks in autumn that year more than 20 universities all over Croatia were occupied with students practically running them.¹² In itself nothing new under the sun one could say, but the way they occupied and ran the universities deserves our attention for its originality in a much larger context than the one of the Balkans or Eastern Europe.

The students set up citizens’ plenary assemblies—called “plenum”—in which not only students but all citizens were invited to debate issues of public importance such as education and, in addition to that, to decide upon the course of the rebellious actions. The most active plenum at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb each evening gathered up to 1000 individuals, students and ordinary citizens, deliberating on the course of action.¹³ This event gave a rise to the movement for direct democracy as a necessary corrective of electoral democracy and partitocracy and, possibly, a true alternative to it. The new Croatian Left, whose ideas quickly spread around the post-Yugoslav space, do not see direct democracy limited to the referendum practice but rather as a means of political organisation for people from local communes to the national level. The proof that it was not only an idea of marginal groups came very soon after the students’ occupations. Between 2009 and 2011 Croatia witnessed a massive movement (under the name “The Right to City”) for preservation of urban space in downtown Zagreb that had been sold by the city government to big investors, but also a wave of

¹² We have written extensively about the student and civic rebellions that involved occupation of universities but also a defence of public spaces in our book *The Right to Rebellion - An Introduction to the Anatomy of Civic Resistance* (see footnote 1). For an overview of the student movement see Mate Kapović, ‘Two years of struggle for free education and the development of a new student movement in Croatia’, *Slobodni Filozofski*, published at <http://slobodnifilozofski.org/?p=2216>, 4 January 2011.

¹³ For a detailed overview of the student actions see *The Occupation Cookbook, or the Model of the Occupation of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb*, Minorcompositions, New York, 2011. See <http://www.minorcompositions.info/occupationcookbook.html>.

workers' strikes involving the textile industry, shipyards and farmers' protests. Some of these collective actions used the "plenum" model developed at the universities or a sort of direct democratic action that came as a huge surprise to the political elite and the mainstream media.

This is not a colour revolution!

Although the new left was pivotal in shifting the nature of the current protests, they did not turn into clearly marked leftist demonstrations but into a genuine people's movement: in February, March and April this year up to 10,000 people assembled every other evening in Zagreb and up to a couple of thousands in other cities.¹⁴ Besides a rhetorical shift (a strong anti-capitalist discourse unheard of in independent Croatia and elsewhere in the Balkans), the crucial point was the rejection of leaders, which gave citizens an opportunity to decide on the direction and the form of their protests. The "Indian revolution" previously limited to squares soon turned into long marches through Zagreb. It was a clear example of how "invited spaces of citizenship", designed as such by state structures and police for "kettled" expression of discontent, were superseded by "invented spaces of citizenship"¹⁵ when citizens themselves opened new ways and venues for their subversive actions questioning legality in the name of the legitimacy of their demands. This was not a static classical protest anymore and, unlike the famous Belgrade walks from 1996-1997, the Zagreb ones were not aimed only at the government as such or the ruling party and its boss(es). They acquired a strong anti-systemic critique, exemplified by the fact that protesters were regularly "visiting" the nodal political, social and economic points of contemporary Croatia (political parties, banks, government offices, unions, privatisation fund, TV and media outlets etc.). The flags of the ruling conservative Croatian Democratic Union, the Social-Democratic Party (seen as not opposing the neo-liberal reforms) and even the EU (seen as being complicit in the elite's wrongdoings) were burned. The protesters even "visited" the residences of the ruling party politicians signalling in that way a widespread belief that their newly acquired wealth is nothing more than a legalised robbery.

And here is precisely the novelty of these protests. This is not yet another "colour revolution" of a kind the Western media and academia are usually so enthusiastic about (but otherwise not interested in following how the "waves of democratisation" often replace one autocrat by the other, more cooperative one). The US-sponsored colour revolutions never put in question the political or economic system as such but responded to a genuine demand of these societies to get rid of the authoritarian and corrupt elites mostly formed in the 1990s. The Croatian example shows that for the first time we do not have an anti-government rhetoric per se but a true anti-Regime sentiment. Not only the state but the whole apparatus on which the current oligarchy is based is put into question by, albeit chaotically, self-organised citizens. And no colour is needed to mark this kind of revolution that obviously cannot hope for any external help or international media coverage. You can just do the only thing the dispossessed could do: marching through

¹⁴ Up to 10,000 occupied the main Zagreb square on the October 15 worldwide day of action and held the first 'people's plenum' there but failed to turn it into a continuous occupation

¹⁵ See Faranak Miraftab, 'Invented and Invited Spaces of Participation: Neoliberal Citizenship and Feminists Expanded Notion of Politics', *Wagadu* 1, Spring 2004.

your cities signalling the *topoi* of the Regime almost cemented over last two decades but susceptible to crack under the weight of its own contradictions and products such as, for instance, expanding poverty. The emergence and nature of these Croatian protests invites us also to rethink the categories used to explain the social, political and economic situation in the Balkans and elsewhere in post-socialist Eastern Europe.

Conclusive remarks: a new dawn in the Balkans?

We demonstrated in this analysis how the very concept of transition as an ideological construct of domination based on the narrative of integration of the former socialist Europe into the Western core actually hides a monumental neo-colonial transformation of this region into a dependent semi-periphery. The adjunct concepts of “weak state” or “failed state”, for example, cover the fact that these are not anomalies of the Transition but one of its main products. The famous corruption problem poses a puzzle for observers and scholars bringing many to conclude that, since the liberal system as such is beyond questioning, a widespread corruption must be related to culture or path-dependent behaviour in the “East”. However, corruption in reality seems to be a direct consequence of the post-1989 neo-liberal scramble for Eastern Europe, and, furthermore, a frequent behaviour across the EU itself. In order to understand post-communist, eternal transitional predicament and especially the current political and economic situation in the Balkans one has to go beyond the analysis of the state, its failure and weakness, and engage with the concept of Regime seen as a conglomerate grouping political elites, attached businesses and their Western partners, serving media corporations, NGOs promoting the holy couple of electoral democracy and neoliberal economy, organised crime itself intimately related to political and economic elites, foreign-owned predatory banks and, finally, a corrupt judiciary and controlled unions. Other “ideological apparatuses” of the Regime help to cement the results of the big neo-liberal transformation.

And here lies the minimal common denominator between the Balkans today and the Arab spring: all these protest movements, despite their clear differences, are profoundly anti-Regime. Rebelling against post-socialist Regimes is all that much harder because they often do not have a single face, no dictator, no governing families or royalties and are not characterised by open repression and censorship. And yet, the anger is similar. A logical question is thus the following: is a new dawn in Eastern Europe and especially Balkan politics announced in these protests? You do not have to be familiar with the history of the Balkans to know that the possibility of a new revitalised nationalism is not unrealistic. But, on the other hand, to dismiss a new people’s movement because it is heterogeneous and subject to all sorts of developments means not only to abandon the idea of “the will of people”¹⁶ but to stick to the old fantasy about precise mature moments for revolutions. The Arab example shows that the situation remains open even after the People give a significant but not the final blow to the Regime. The example of Croatia demonstrates how a situation that has been initiated by right-wing elements can be turned into its opposite and can be co-opted by newly emerging and imaginative progressive

¹⁶ See Peter Hallward, ‘The will of the people: notes towards a dialectical voluntarism’, *Radical Philosophy* 155, May/June 2009.

forces. It also demonstrates that a new generation enters politics *via* direct democratic actions and the street and not political channels of electoral democracy and party politics. The new left we detected within this movement is dissociated both from the past of state socialism and from traditional social-democratic parties. Sometimes in unlikely places such as the Middle East or Croatia, we can see a sudden explosion of original radicality from which many in the West, too comfortable in the structures of liberal “oppressive tolerance”, could learn a great deal about the forms and methods of subversive politics in the 21st century.